

The Extraordinary Art of Ngukurr

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Gertie Huddlestone: *Garden of Eden II* 1999

Iconophilia proposes Cath Bowdler's [*Colour Country: art from Roper River*](#) at [Wagga Wagga Art Gallery](#) as a contender for the contemporary Aboriginal Art exhibition of the year. Why? Because it tells us so much about the potential of an art which develops outside the mainstream, and by contrast, some of the limitations of its near neighbours. Of all the remote communities which have participated in the Indigenous art renaissance of the past three decades, only Ngukurr has been able to develop in its own (myriad) directions, relatively free from the interventions and restrictions of the art advisors who have guided the aesthetic character of most remote art centres. True, some big city gallerists sought to corner the outputs of some of the original significant figures in the first generation of Ngukurr artists, however this exhibition shows how extraordinarily resilient that first generation proved to be.



Based on Cath Bowdler's original scholarship, the fifty works in this exhibition trace the origins of this complex "movement" since 1987. The major figures of this first generation are artists such as Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, Djambu Barra Barra (above), Willie Gudabi, Gertie Huddleston and Amy Jirwulurr Johnson. Many of the works in this exhibition have not been previously exhibited.



Roper River borders the southern boundary of Arnhem Land, and Ngukurr is the site of the original Anglican Mission. This is a community which has benefitted from its remoteness, even though it has not enjoyed the protections and independence of other Arnhem Land communities. Despite the absence of a high-profile arts centre, Ngukurr Arts, the artist-run community art centre, has produced arguably the most consistently innovative forms and styles of any remote community.

Louise Hamby comments: “The week following the long weekend in June was a high point in openings for Aboriginal art. Some of the same people from the Melbourne opening of Lindy Allen’s *Ancestral Power and the Aesthetic* at the Potter made their way to Cath Bowdler’s opening of *Colour Country* at Wagga Wagga Art Gallery. The art from the Roper River area of Arnhem Land was a strong contrast to the eloquent barks from eastern Arnhem Land from the 1930s. I was instantly drawn to the lime green wall of the gallery. Hanging there the Sambo Sambo Burra Burra paintings were demanding attention. I have always had a soft spot for his work because of the inclusion of baskets in, on and inside the bodies of the figures he depicts. The other major draw card for me were the storyboard paintings of Gertie Huddlestone. Here the strong colours are more like threads and spots of colours stitched and quilted together. This exhibition is well worth a trip to Wagga Wagga to see such an unusual group of works all together making a different statement about colour and country.”

If these installation photographs prove too tempting, hike on down to the Wagga. If you miss it at Wagga Wagga Art Gallery (until August 2), see it at the Flinders University Art Museum, Adelaide, the Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra or the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, finishing in July, 2010. A full-colour catalogue is also [available](#).

3 comments ↓

#1 [vanessa](#) on 06.13.09 at 10:16 pm

I am looking forward to this show, good to see Wagga Wagga art gallery (old haunt) hosting it, new

manager Cath Bowdler is obviously doing a fantastic job.

[#2](#) **Abi** on 08.01.09 at 11:26 am

This exhibit is everything Nigel says and more. Many of the works, but especially Barra Barra's painting Cypress Pine, speak loud enough to be heard above the cacophony of "outsider" or "aboriginal" labels.

[#3 Roper River's Richness | Aboriginal Art & Culture: an American eye](#) on 04.29.12 at 2:24 pm

[...] Gallery, has come as close as possible in the title of the new exhibition she has mounted there: Colour Country: art from Roper River. "Colour" is the immediate key, brilliant and spectrum-crossing, primary, fluorescent, [...]

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